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INFO CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

SENSITIVE
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MOSCOW FOR USDA/KIM SVEC

E.O. 129581: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [KFLU](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: UNCONFIRMED AFRICAN SWINE FEVER OUTBREAK IN ARMENIA

REF: PENNINGTON-PERRY TELCON 8/24/07

1.

1.(SBU) SUMMARY: Agriculture Minister Lokian called in post's USDA officer August 24 to report his ministry's strong suspicion that a virus that has recently appeared in northern Armenia is the African Swine Fever (ASF) that has already decimated the pig population in Georgia. He requested USG assistance in containing the outbreak, but containment efforts probably will not suffice to avert the need to slaughter the country's entire swine population of 300,000 to prevent virus' spread. Post has recommended the GOAM work with Georgian officials who have both expertise and USG-donated supplies, as well as with a USAID-funded avian-flu team for procurement of needed supplies and development of strategies to contain the virus. END SUMMARY.

IT WALKS AND TALKS LIKE ASF

2. (U) Agriculture Minister Lokian requested USG assistance to combat a still-unidentified virus that was discovered in the northern regions of Lori and Tavush and which appear to be an outbreak of ASF. While this virus is not harmful to humans, it is transmittable to rodents and livestock and therefore could have devastating consequences on the Armenian agricultural sector if not swiftly contained. Although test samples sent earlier this week to Georgia have not yet confirmed ASF, the GOAM is acting on the assumption that testing will confirm their suspicion. The alternative is no less devastating: a classic swine fever (CSF) that is also likely to wipe out the country's swine population (which is registered at approximately 153,000 but by most estimates is closer to 300,000).

REQUEST FOR HELP

3. (U) The GOAM requested assistance in conducting CSF/ASF differential diagnosis, provision of diagnostic kits, and shipment of samples to reference laboratories. Post has responded to the GOAM request with following recommendations:

-- Send a virus sample to London in order to obtain official confirmation of ASF; if test results confirm ASF, the results would be automatically forwarded to the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations for their assistance;

-- Establish immediate contact with - Georgia, which has both the

supplies (donated by the USG) and the expertise required to contain this virus; and

-- - Work with a team of agricultural engineers from the European-based Bird Flu Control Group, which is serendipitously currently running a series of training exercises in combating animal disease epidemics for GOAM, and could be at the GOAM's disposal as early as tomorrow. They can assist in coordinating an effective plan for the containment and eradication (through proper slaughter and disposal of swine) of the outbreak in the northern regions of Armenia.

GETTING SAMPLES TO THE LAB

4.(U) The GOAM is experiencing difficulty in sending virus samples to the reference lab in Perbright, UK, which in the best-case scenario would require about 72 hours. British Airways has refused to transport the samples to London, due to lack of a person in Yerevan trained to handle hazardous materials (although they did handle AI samples) and customs difficulties. The alternative method is to send the samples in pre-paid packages via FedEx, a process also developed for a possible avian influenza (AI) outbreak.

SWALLOWING PRIDE

15. (SBU) Post believes that the Georgian Government may be willing to assist the GOAM in confronting this outbreak, and understands that Georgian scientists have already been providing assistance in Armenia's northern regions. (NOTE: Post's USDA/FAS director divides his time equally between Armenian and Georgia, and is accredited to both. END NOTE) To get full-scale assistance, however, will likely require a formal request from Lokian to his Georgian counterpart, which may be complicated by Armenian dislike of Georgia taking on a leading regional role in animal health. Post believes that despite this, Lokian will request Georgian assistance.

HITTING THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD IT LEAST

16. (U) This outbreak threatens to harm some of Armenia's poorest residents, as pigs are often kept in small numbers by rural villagers who depend on them for a significant part of their income. The effects will be even more devastating should the virus spread to other animal populations.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Despite the procedures developed and put in place following the AI outbreak, there appears to have been a breakdown of the system that Armenia now needs. Rather than following established protocols, the GOAM appears to have panicked, as shown in the manner it has reached out to the USG and in its inability to get virus samples to the lab in a timely manner. This is also a case in which it is evident that Armenia and Georgia need to maintain closer and more cooperative high-level ties in order to ensure swift response to a crisis that does not respect national borders. Post will report further on this situation as it develops.

18. (SBU) This message was coordinated with Embassy Tblisi per ref telcon.

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